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Front Page | Edit Page | Other Page

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Riots Can Be The Voice Of The People

WHETHER the rioters in South Vietnam are expressing the will of the majority of people of South Vietnam, we have no idea. No one, we suppose, could do more than guess about it, for the people of that country never have been consulted by the governments which have imposed themselves on them.

Perhaps these rioters are nothing more than a dissident minority. On the other hand, perhaps they are the 10 percent of the iceberg that shows above the surface and under them is a vast but voiceless majority.

Whatever the truth, one aspect of these riots must be disturbing to all Americans. It is the fact that, as one wire service said, "The riots generally had anti-American overtones. In Saigon, one student speaker shouted, 'Let this be a warning to the United States. Do not interfere in South Vietnam's domestic problems.'"

Is this man speaking only for a small group or for the majority of Vietnamese? Is the American presence in South Vietnam resented by the people? Would the majority there rather switch allegiance to a neutralist or even Communist government than continue the war? Without some sort of plebiscite, the answers to those questions cannot be much more than guesswork.

Three American administrations—those of Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson—have advanced the proposition that we are in South Vietnam to help the people of that country defend themselves against Communist aggression. But what if this proposition is based on a false premise? As we have asked before, what if the South Vietnamese don't want to be defended? It is true that the various Vietnamese governments keep asking for more and more American aid, but these recurring riots suggest that what the government wants and what the people want are not necessarily the same.

A people which is not given the opportunity to express itself in an orderly process not infrequently expresses itself in a disorderly manner, as in these riots.

In Washington, the government has released, even though reluctantly, a report bearing on this question. It was prepared by Willard Matthias, a member of the Central Intelligence Agency's Board of National Estimates. Administration sources made it public only after learning that it was to be published by a newspaper.

In the report Matthias broke sharply with all the optimism that until very recently had been sounded in Saigon and Washington, and the government made clear his opinions were his own and not those of the government. He wrote:

"The guerrilla war in South Vietnam is in its fifth year and no end appears in sight. The Viet Cong in the south, dependent largely upon their own resources but under the direction and control of the Communist regime in the north, are pressing their offensive more vigorously than ever. . . . There remains serious doubt that victory can be won, and the situation remains very fragile . . ." About the most that Matthias could foresee was "a prolonged stalemate."

This, of course, runs counter to virtually everything such men as Defense Secretary McNamara, Ambassador Lodge, and President Johnson have been saying. And the words of one obscure C.I.A. man may not weigh much when balanced against those of such high officials.

At the same time, his words seem to draw a more accurate picture of what is going on in South Vietnam than those of his more illustrious fellow officials. The end of the war does not appear to be in sight, the guerrillas (badly outnumbered, frequently armed with American weapons captured from the South Vietnamese army, and operating in what is theoretically hostile territory) are more successful than they have been in a long time, and the political situation obviously is delicate.

The riots in South Vietnam and the success of the Viet Cong make us wonder—and not for the first time—about what the people of South Vietnam really would like.